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ABSTRACT

Self-directed learning has been a high-interest topic within the field of adult education for the last decade. The following are among suggestions writers have made about how adult educators can best facilitate self-directed learning: (1) encourage learners to appreciate that they can act on their world individually or collectively to transform it; (2) negotiate a learning contract for goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria with learners; (3) be a manager of the learning experience rather than an information provider; (4) provide examples of previously acceptable work; (5) teach inquiry skills, decision making, personal development, and self-evaluation of work; (6) help learners locate resources; (7) help learners develop feelings of independence relative to learning; (8) use techniques such as field experience and problem solving that take advantage of adults' rich experience base; (9) develop high-quality learning guides; (10) encourage critical thinking skills by incorporating such activities as seminars; and (11) create an atmosphere of openness and trust to promote better performance. The following are among suggestions for institutions and employers: (1) meet regularly with panels of experts who can suggest curricula and evaluation criteria; (2) obtain the necessary tools to assess learners' current performance and to evaluate their expected performance; (3) recognize and reward learners when they have met their learning objectives; and (4) promote learning networks. (The document includes 13 references.) (CML)

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

SUPPORTING AND FACILITATING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Perhaps because the concept is so central to what adult education is all about (Mezirow 1985), self-directed learning has been one of the field's high-interest topics for more than a decade. Researchers, theorists, and practitioners have all asked the questions: What is self-directed learning? Who is engaged in it? What are the proper roles for educators and institutions wanting to provide it?

What Is Self-Directed Learning?

An estimated 70 percent of adult learning is self-directed learning (Cross 1981). Self-directed learning has been described as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others," to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes (Knowles 1975).

Mocker and Spear (1982) included self-directed learning in a descriptive model of lifelong learning based entirely on the locus of control for decision making about the objectives and means of learning. The model is a two-by-two matrix of learner and institution; the self-directed learning situation occurs when learners--not the institution--control both the learning objectives and the means of learning. The following situations occupy the other cells of the matrix: (1) formal learning, in which institutions, not learners, control objectives and the means of learning; (2) nonformal learning, in which learners control the objectives and institutions control the means; and (3) informal learning, in which institutions control the objectives but learners control the means of learning.

Thus, whether or not learning is self-directed depends not on the subject matter to be learned or on the instructional methods used. Instead, self-directedness depends on who is in charge--who decides what should be learned, who should learn it, what methods and resources should be used, and how the success of the effort should be measured. To the extent the learner makes those decisions, the learning is generally considered to be self-directed.

Perhaps only **degrees** of self-directedness are actually possible, given the frequent necessity of maintaining institutional standards and, as Mezirow (1985) points out, the impossibility of freely choosing among objectives unless all possible objectives are known. Some writers have pointed out that Mocker and Spear's model could be viewed as a continuum rather than as a matrix.

Some self-directed learning takes place in comparative isolation in secluded libraries. Other self-directed learners engage in more interpersonal communication (with experts and peers, for instance) than is typically available in conventional classroom education.

The resources available to self-directed learners include printed and audiovisual materials; experts interviewed by letter, telephone, or in person; cultural institutions such as museums, zoos, and arboretums; and associations of all types.

Who Is Engaged in Self-Directed Learning?

About 90 percent of all adults conduct at least one self-directed learning project per year. Typical learners engage in five, spending an average of 100 hours on each project (Tough 1978). (It is important to bear in mind that most of the research that has been conducted on self-directed learning has investigated the activities of middle-class adults.)

Many self-directed learners are attempting to gain new skills, knowledge, and attitudes to improve their work performance. Others conduct their self-directed learning to improve family life and health, enjoy the arts and physical recreation, participate in a hobby, or simply increase their intellectual capital.

Adult educators have found that some adults are incapable of engaging in self-directed learning because they lack independence, confidence, or resources. Not all adults prefer the self-directed option, and even the adults who practice self-directed learning also engage in more formal educational experiences such as teacher-directed courses (Brookfield 1985).

What Are the Proper Roles for Educators and Institutions?

The following list summarizes points made by several writers (Ash 1985; Bauer 1985; Brockett and Hiemstra 1985; Brookfield 1985; Cross 1978; Hiemstra 1982, 1985; and Reisser 1973) regarding how adult educators can best facilitate self-directed learning:

- Help the learner identify the starting point for a learning project and discern relevant modes of examination and reporting.
- Encourage adult learners to view knowledge and truth as contextual, to see value frameworks as cultural constructs, and to appreciate that they can act on their world individually or collectively to transform it.
- Create a partnership with the learner by negotiating a learning contract for goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria.
- Be a manager of the learning experience rather than an information provider.
- Help learners acquire the needs assessment techniques necessary to discover what objectives they should set.
- Encourage the setting of objectives that can be met in several ways and offer a variety of options for evidence of successful performance.
- Provide examples of previously acceptable work.
- Make sure that learners are aware of the objectives, learning strategies, resources, and evaluation criteria once they are decided upon.

- Teach inquiry skills, decision making, personal development, and self-evaluation of work.
- Act as advocates for educationally underserved populations to facilitate their access to resources.
- Help match resources to the needs of learners.
- Help learners locate resources.
- Help learners develop positive attitudes and feelings of independence relative to learning.
- Recognize learner personality types and learning styles.
- Use techniques such as field experience and problem solving that take advantage of adults' rich experience base.
- Develop high-quality learning guides, including programmed learning kits.
- Encourage critical thinking skills by incorporating such activities as seminars.
- Create an atmosphere of openness and trust to promote better performance.
- Help protect learners against manipulation by promoting a code of ethics.
- Behave ethically, which includes not recommending a self-directed learning approach if it is not congruent with the learners' needs.

For educational institutions and employers engaged in providing self-directed learning experiences, Hiemstra (1982, 1985) and Brockett and Hiemstra (1985) recommend the following:

- Have the faculty meet regularly with panels of experts who can suggest curricula and evaluation criteria.
- Conduct research on trends and learners' interests.
- Obtain the necessary tools to assess learners' current performance and to evaluate their expected performance.
- Provide opportunities for self-directed learners to reflect on what they are learning.
- Recognize and reward learners when they have met their learning objectives.
- Promote learning networks, study circles, and learning exchanges.
- Provide staff training on self-directed learning and broaden the opportunities for its implementation.

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